

The Gospel of Matthew *THE MINISTRY OF JOHN THE BAPTIST (3:1 - 3:12)*

He was a Levite, born of a priest named Zacharias and his wife Elizabeth, a cousin of Jesus Christ through his mother, Mary. He was called the greatest man that ever lived (Matthew 11:11) by the only one qualified to make such a statement. In John 3:25-30, he referred to himself as the “friend of the bridegroom”, although having limited contact with Jesus. He is the last of the Old Testament prophets and served as the transition into the ministry of the New Covenant and revelation of Jesus Christ (Luke 16:16). Every gospel precedes the ministry of Jesus by first describing the ministry of this man. We are of course speaking of John the Baptist. Although our record of John in the early chapters of Matthew is relatively brief, we will find his work and role woven throughout this gospel. Even today, many Baptists view the work of John as being foundational to the New Testament Church.

John the Baptist (3:1,4)

THE DAYS OF JOHN THE BAPTIST

The times in which John the Baptist ministered are described in more detail in Luke 3:1-3. Herod the Great, who ruled at the time of Christ’s birth died several years prior, before Jesus and his parents returned from Egypt and settled in Nazareth. The four areas ruled by Herod the Great were split by two of his sons, Herod Antipas and Philip, along with Pontius Pilate and another man named Lysanias. John preached primarily in the wilderness of Judaea, which would have been under Pilate’s authority. His ministry began in the 15th year of Tiberius Caesar’s reign.

The account of John’s birth is given to us in Luke 1, and was nothing short of miraculous. His parents conceived him at a very old age, past the years of normal childbearing. His birth and manner of life was announced to his father during his ministry at the Jewish temple. His name, John, means “the grace or mercy of the Lord”. Read Luke 1:13-17 and complete the following statements.

John would live under the vow of a **Nazarite**. What did this mean for him? See Numbers 6:1-8. **There were various ceremonial requirements made of him. Ultimately, it meant he was holy to the Lord, meaning separated and consecrated to service. He was fully given to the Lord.**

He was **filled** with the Holy Spirit from his **birth**.

His ministry would be in the spirit and power of the prophet **Elijah**.

His job was to **prepare** a people for the coming of the Lord.

We will eventually discuss John’s ministry in the spirit and power of Elijah in other portions of Matthew. What does it mean that John was filled with the Holy Spirit from birth? Did he have to be saved?

John was set apart from the womb, much like Samuel, Jeremiah (Jer. 1:5), Paul (Gal. 1:15), David (Psalm 22:10), and others. This didn’t make him exempt from sin or the requirement for salvation (Rom 3:23). It indicated a pattern of life that was controlled by the influence of the Holy Spirit, even in his youth.

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Why is John called, "the Baptist"?

It was because of what he did, not because of a denominational affiliation. It means "baptizer". The term, "Baptist" in its denominational usage came into play

What is the significance of John's clothing? See 2 Kings 1:5-8 and Malachi 4:5.

Elijah had similar clothing and John was fulfilling the prophetic office of Elijah in his ministry. This attire had come to be associated with the office of prophet. In fact, we can read in Zechariah 13:4 that false prophets even put on a "rough garment" (hairy robe) to deceive others.

John's food did little more than give him strength to fulfill the ministry to which he was called. How did the religious establishment view John's attire and food? Read Matthew 11:7-19 for further insight.

They likely mocked his food and raiment in order to make themselves look better. John did not accept their self-righteousness for baptism nor recognized their leadership, so they were not accepting of him and in fact called him, "a devil". However, they proved themselves hypocrites by criticizing Jesus for being so different from John. Ultimately, it was the truth they rejected.

The Message of John (3:2-3)

A preacher is simply noise without a message to preach. In Luke 3:2, we read, "... the word of God came unto John the son of Zacharias in the wilderness." God gave him a message. It was a simple, yet profound message that was a necessary precursor to the ministry of Jesus Christ.

What does "Repent" mean? What was the context in which John preached repentance?

Repentance is a change of direction and change of mind. It is the effectual working of His Spirit to bring about a fundamental change in the heart of men, turning them away from sin and darkness toward the light of the life of God. This change is reflected in their life and actions. John commanded the people to repent. It was not meant as a suggestion or an option for consideration.

NOTES ON THE TRANSLATION OF THE WORD, "REPENT"

Broadus used to say that this is the worst translation in the New Testament. The trouble is that the English word "repent" means "to be sorry again" from the Latin *repenitet* (impersonal). John did not call on the people to be sorry, but to change (think afterwards) their mental attitudes (*metanoieite*) and conduct. The Vulgate has it "do penance" and Wycliff has followed that. The Old Syriac has it better: "Turn ye." The French (Geneva) has it "Amendez vous." This is John's great word (Bruce) and it has been hopelessly mistranslated. The tragedy of it is that we have no one English word that reproduces exactly the meaning and atmosphere of the Greek word. The Greek has a word meaning to be sorry (*metamelomai*) which is exactly our English word repent and it is used of Judas (Matthew 27:3).

— A.T. Robertson's *Word Pictures*

The distinction made by Robertson above is reflected in the distinction between godly and worldly sorrow found in 2 Corinthians 7:10.

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The message of repentance John preached implied more than a one-time event in their life. Salvation only occurs once, but repentance is to become a way of life for the believer. John's command to repent is in the present, imperative, active tense in the Greek language. The Complete Word Study New Testament says, "In the active voice, it may indicate a command to do something in the future which involves continuous or repeated action..."¹ As we study the rest of the New Testament, we find that this process, though never completed, characterized the life of God's servants. In Philippians 3:13, Paul says, "Brethren, I count not myself to have apprehended: but this one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind, and reaching forth unto those things which are before,". While we do not explicitly see the word, "repent" in Paul's testimony, we see the process of repentance clearly explained. He turned from the past (sinful way of life) and reached toward the future (total conformity to Jesus Christ).

Was it possible for the people to obey the command to repent? If not, why preach the message? Read Acts 11:18 and Matthew 19:24-26 for further insight.

The answer to this question is yes and no. Yes it was possible for them to repent, but not on their own. They needed the drawing and convicting of the Holy Spirit and the enablement to repent. Yet, they must participate in this process by seeking. In a sense, the preaching of the gospel is brilliant because it tells men what must be done and calls them to seek to do it and find out they cannot. The knowledge of their inability is precisely what drives them to the Lord who produces true repentance and faith in them.

Is John's message of repentance unique to his ministry? Read Job 42:5-6, 1 Samuel 7:3, Ezekiel 14:6, Jonah 3:4-10, Matthew 4:17, Mark 6:7,12, Acts 2:37-38, 17:29-30, and James 4:8-10.

John's message was not unique to his ministry. It was preached from the beginnings of the Old Testament through the New Testament. It was preached by Samuel, Ezekiel, Jonah, John, Jesus, the Apostles, Paul, and by many other saints who have gone before us. The gospel message has remained the same since the beginning of time because man's need and the way of salvation have not changed.

The reason John emphasized Israel's need to repent was that the Kingdom of Heaven was "at hand". What does, "at hand" mean?

It means that it has come and drawn near. It is used in both a positional and a chronological sense in the New Testament, so the exact meaning has to be determined by the context of the passage.

We will be discussing the concept of the Kingdom of Heaven/Kingdom of God in much depth throughout Matthew's gospel. I will start by presenting some different theories or constructs that are used to explain the Kingdom of Heaven and we will start to test each of them as we come across passages dealing with this subject.

First, understand that the concept of a heavenly kingdom is not exclusively a New Testament concept. We see it in the Old Testament too. Read Genesis 49:10, Psalm 89:3-4, and Daniel 2:44 as examples of this teaching. As we discussed in Chapter 2, Jesus was born a King and He came to establish a kingdom.

¹ The Complete Word Study New Testament, edited by Spiros Zodhiates, ThD, © 1992, p. 867

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There are different perspectives on what the Kingdom is and who comprises the Kingdom. It is sometimes useful to start a difficult study like this with a “straw man” that fleshes out an idea or concept that can be tested against Scripture. Let’s first look at theories of what the Kingdom is:

- 1) The reign of Christ, having both a **present** and **future** reality.
- 2) The New Testament **Church**.
- 3) A **future** reality that begins when Christ returns to reign for **1,000** years.
- 4) A **future** reality that begins **after** Christ returns to reign for 1,000 years.

Here are some theories regarding who comprises the Kingdom:

- 1) All **past**, **present**, and **future** believers;
- 2) Those who are saved and scripturally baptized into a local **church**;
- 3) The future nation of **Israel**; and
- 4) All **professing** Christians (even those who are not saved).

We must now go back to our text. What was the message John preached regarding the Kingdom? It was, “at hand”. At hand means to approach, come near, or be nigh. No reference is made in this passage to whether it is speaking in a chronological (the time that it will arrive is close) or spatial (it was drawing near physically) manner. Regardless, the Kingdom was close and John was proclaiming that it was high time to repent and be ready for the King because His kingdom was near.

How does this text mesh with the theories above?

It does not really speak to who would be part of the Kingdom, unless we were to consider that John was baptizing those who demonstrated fruits meet for repentance. Rather, the passage sees the Kingdom as being very close. It certainly seems consistent with the concept that the Kingdom existed in some fashion during Christ’s ministry. John prepared people for Christ’s ministry. The Kingdom was nigh.

John’s ministry of preparation was prophesied in the book of Isaiah many years before his birth.

PROPHECY

“Comfort ye, comfort ye my people, saith your God. Speak ye comfortably to Jerusalem, and cry unto her, that her warfare is accomplished, that her iniquity is pardoned: for she hath received of the LORD’S hand double for all her sins. The voice of him that crieth in the wilderness, Prepare ye the way of the LORD, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be exalted, and every mountain and hill shall be made low: and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough places plain: And the glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together: for the mouth of the LORD hath spoken it. The voice said, Cry. And he said, What shall I cry? All flesh is grass, and all the

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goodliness thereof is as the flower of the field: The grass withereth, the flower fadeth: because the spirit of the LORD bloweth upon it: surely the people is grass. The grass withereth, the flower fadeth: but the word of our God shall stand for ever.” – Isaiah 40:1-8

In what way was the path of the Lord made straight by the preaching of John?

John prepared a people who would be ready to receive the teaching and ministry of Jesus Christ. There were at least 13 (no doubt many more) who were saved and baptized, and continued under the teaching of Christ. John’s ministry was one of hope for the downtrodden (valleys) and humility for the proud (mountains), seeking to bring all men to the same level where they might receive Christ. Truly, all flesh is in the same boat, even though we don’t often see it. The gospel brings us to the same place.

Malachi 4:4-6 and Luke 1:17 provide us with more detail about the ministry of John the Baptist. In what way did he turn the hearts of the fathers to the children and the children to the fathers? Read also Deuteronomy 4:9-10, and 6:4-16.

John aimed to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children and the children to the fathers by reestablishing God’s standard of righteousness which had been forgotten by the people. God wanted them to be a holy people and to teach their children to be holy. This had been left by the wayside at some point. By preaching righteousness, he showed the need for repentance. Those who repented would have their hearts turned back to the Lord and to their children to teach them. If they didn’t turn, they would be smitten with a curse. Perhaps this is what happened to the Jews of that generation.

John’s Baptism (3:5-6)

John did much of his ministry in the Jordan River valley between the Sea of Galilee and the Dead Sea. The Jordan River begins in the snows of Mt. Hermon in the land of Lebanon and flows through the Sea of Galilee, South to the Dead Sea, a body of water that is actually below sea level. The Jordan corridor stretches most of the length of the Holy Land and indicates that while John may have preached primarily in Judea, he also preached as far North as Galilee. This would make sense as many of the apostles were originally disciples of John and were from Galilee.

John captured the attention of the Jews and many people came out to hear him. Why was there such an interest in John? Read Amos 8:11-14 and Matthew 21:25-26.

No prophet had spoken to Israel in around 400 years since Malachi. The hand of God was upon John in such a way that people knew he was from God. There was finally an end to the famine of God’s Word.

DID JOHN ONLY BAPTIZE IN THE JORDAN RIVER?

According to Scripture, John did not limit his baptizing to the Jordan River. He also baptized in an area West of Jordan called Aenon (John 3:23-24). The People’s New Testament Commentary says, “The site was first identified by Lieutenant Conder, of the British Palestine Exploration. He found a village of Ainon near another named Salim, not far from the Jordan, northeast of Samaria, with, as he says (Tent Work, p. 92), ‘the two requisites for the scene of baptism of a large multitude;--an open space and abundance of water.’ Prof. McGarvey, who visited it, says: ‘Pools, well suited for baptizing are abundant.’”

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Those who John baptized came “confessing their sins”. What does this mean? As we head into our next section of the text we will see this concept developed more fully in the context of the Pharisees.

Warning to Pharisees and Sadducees (3:7-10)

The Pharisees and Sadducees were the most influential ruling parties of Jewish religious life. We can think of them as the “conservatives” (Pharisees) and the “liberals” (Sadducees). They shared power in the Sanhedrin, the religious high council of the Jews (Acts 23:1-8).

The Pharisees were typically blue collar Jews who were morally conservative and took great pains to keep the law. Their downfall was pride. As a group, they held a lot of power in Jewish life and were regarded as very pious in the eyes of others.

The Sadducees were usually elitist Jews of the upper class. They had wealth and influence and were often associated closely with the Herodians (the family and supporters of King Herod) and the Roman government. They were much more liberal in their interpretation of Scripture and in their morality as well. For example, they did not believe in angels or the afterlife. They were the first ones to cooperate with the Roman powers and were quick to incorporate the Roman lifestyle into their own. The temple rituals were very important to this sect. The chief priests were typically Sadducees as they were part of the elite portion of Jewish society and worked with the Roman government.

Jesus brought a unity to Israel’s two sects of religious leaders that no one thought possible. How did He unite them? Read John 11:45-53.

They united in their fear and hatred of Jesus Christ. They took council together to put Him to death because they knew that many were starting to believe in Him. This was a threat to their power.

As we discussed earlier, John attracted a lot of attention and gained a great following. Why did John reject the Pharisees and Sadducees who came to be baptized by him? Look back to Matthew 3:6. **It is implied that they sought to come for baptism without “confessing their sins”. The Pharisees felt they were keeping the law with their outward obedience and the Sadducees didn’t think there was much of a law to be kept. Ultimately, neither group felt they needed repentance and therefore brought no evidence of a changed heart and life.**

Why did the Pharisees and Sadducees feel that John should baptize them?

It appears they believed that their “Jewishness” (descent from Abraham) made them worthy of baptism. They had a great deal of national pride.

In our discussion of John’s message, we established that his ministry was meant to level the playing field by exalting the valleys and bringing down the mountains. All men are sinners against a holy God and need a Savior. All men need to repent. The Pharisees and Sadducees had ears to hear but their hearts were dull and they did not perceive their great need for cleansing. Without true repentance (conversion), John had no basis upon which to baptize them and they were therefore rejected.

A GENERATION OF VIPERS

John called the Pharisees and Sadducees a “generation of vipers”. This is a phrase we will see Christ use two more times in this study (Matthew 12:34 and 23:33). The word, generation means, “offspring, fruit, or produce”. A viper is a small, common, and very poisonous snake. They are often small and can even be mistaken for a branch when they are still but their bite can produce rapid death. The Apostle Paul was bit by a viper and when he lived, the residents of the Island of Malta thought he was a god (Acts 28:3-6). Of course, the reference to a viper has a far more deadly reference in Scripture than just poison. The serpent was the animal used by Satan to tempt Adam and Eve (Genesis 3:1). By calling the Pharisees and Sadducees a generation of vipers, John was calling them the children of the devil. This is consistent with what Jesus says of them later in Matthew and of a more descriptive dialogue recorded by the Apostle John (John 8:38-45).

Read John 8:34-45 and Romans 10:1-4. What was it that the Pharisees and Sadducees were doing wrong? How was their behavior consistent with their father, the devil?

They were establishing their own righteousness and both rejected and resented the righteousness of God because His righteousness exposed their wickedness. Satan believed in his own beauty and wanted to be greater than God. That pride was his downfall, just as it was for the Pharisees and Sadducees.

Did John close the door on the possibility of Pharisees and Sadducees receiving his baptism? If not, under what circumstance would John administer their baptism?

No, they had the same requirement as everyone else: bring forth, “fruits meet for repentance”.

The phrase “fruits meet for repentance” in the King James Version is alternatively translated by several different Bible versions: “bear fruit in keeping with repentance” (NASB), “bear fruits worthy of repentance” (NKJV), “produce fruit in keeping with repentance” (NIV), or even, “Prove by the way you live that you have really turned from your sins and turned to God” (NLT). Read Luke 3:7-14, which provides further description of John’s response. What was John looking for when he baptized someone?

John no doubt attacked some idols head on in his response. There is a natural strife between the “haves” and “have nots”. The soldiers and tax collectors abused their positions. To change this natural inclination required a heart change. John wanted external evidence of an internal occurrence.

How can John’s criteria inform our examination of candidates for baptism? Keep in mind that our practice must harmonize with other New Testament instruction and examples of baptism. Read Matthew 7:15-20; and Acts 2:37-42, 8:35-38, and 26:19-20, as examples.

John looked for the same heart transformation in each person he baptized, but was flexible in how the evidence of repentance would manifest itself from individual to individual. This continued in later New Testament preaching. To an individual with an anti-Christian sentiment, a simple confession of their faith in Christ would indicate a significant change occurred in their heart. Someone else who comes from a Christian family may have to produce further evidence of a changed life. In all circumstances, we look for proof that the individual had an encounter with God that changed them.

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Two warnings are contained in John's message here. First, he warns them to "flee from the wrath to come". He then tells them that the axe is laid at the root of the trees and the trees that don't bring forth good fruit though will be cut down and thrown into the fire. Why was destructing impending and how and when did this come? Read Hebrews 10:26-31.

John's ministry centered on preparing the way for Christ. Christ is the way, the truth, and the life. He is the greatest manifestation of God that world will ever know in its present state. To receive such revelation and reject Him, despise Him, and ultimately crucify Him, made them only fit to be burned. Their destruction as a people came in 70 AD. Their fire, however, will forever burn in lake of fire.

The One to Come (3:11-12)

In New Testament times, people frequently wore sandals. There were no paved streets to walk on. Open sewage ditches often lined the streets. It takes very little imagination to realize how filthy your feet would become during that time. This is why foot washing was such an act of humility. It was a dirty job and only performed by lowly servants. John states emphatically that he is unworthy to bear the shoes of the one who would come after him. As we know, John is not one given to exaggeration or humor. In light of all we have studied about John the Baptist, what does his statement imply about the one to come? Read Matthew 11:11.

John was the greatest man ever born of woman. For John to be unworthy to bear the shoes of the one to come must mean that this one is more than a man. This is great support for the Deity of Christ.

Clearly, we recognize the one to come as Jesus Himself. How does John describe Jesus' role?

Jesus was the one who would administer spiritual baptism and fire baptism. He would also separate the righteous from the wicked.

SEPARATING WHEAT FROM CHAFF

A "fan" is a winnowing fork. It is a device used to toss separated wheat kernels and their chaff (straw) up into the air on a windy day. The wind would blow the lighter straw away and the heavier wheat kernels could fall to the ground where they would be collected and stored in the garner (barn). This process is used in Scripture as a description of the separation between the righteous and the wicked.

What is the baptism of the Holy Ghost (Spirit)? Read Acts 1:1-5, 2:1-4.

The baptism of the Spirit is the empowerment of the church to accomplish the work it was commissioned to do by Christ.

Looking at the context of this passage and surrounding passages, what is a baptism of fire?

It must be eternal destruction in hell. This is what John warns the Pharisees and Sadducees of; it is also the fulfillment of the illustration about the wheat and chaff.

How did (or will) Christ fulfill this prophecy? Read Matthew 25:31-46.

Christ did send the Spirit to baptize the early Church. He will one day sit in judgment and separate the saved from the lost and send the lost into everlasting fire and torment.